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AUTHOR Wasserman, Susan
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ABSTRACT

Bilingual education projects utilizing various literary genres--fables, folk, and animal tales--as the stimuli for written and oral English activities have aided Mexican-American children in overcoming English language handicaps. During the three summers such an English program was undertaken with children from a Mexican-American disadvantaged area, it was observed that (1) these children need many oral and written language experiences; (2) a flexible, creative climate within a structured language program produces maximum learning; (3) literature provides an appealing basis on which children can build their understanding of the language; (4) oral-aural opportunities help children to internalize the English language; and (5) children's ready recognition of story structure stimulates their improvisations which increase their communication skills. (JMC)

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Raising the English Language Proficiency of Mexican American Children in the Primary Grades

SUSAN WASSERMAN
San Fernando Valley State College

School achievement seems heavily biased in favor of children who are proficient in written and oral English. Because of this, prior socialization to the language of instruction seems to enhance school performance. If this assumption is correct, many Mexican-American children are indeed disadvantaged (from the first day they enter) the formal competitive institution of the Anglo school.

There have been many projects as of late concerned with the amelioration of the Mexican-American's school language problem. Bilingual education, English as a Second Language techniques, etc., have been the basis for innovative programs. One such program was undertaken at San Fernando State College in the summers of 1967 and 1968 in connection with an NDEA Institute in English for elementary teachers.

An integral part of the institute was the Demonstration School, which provided the vehicle for the application of academic discipline to the elementary classroom. Although there were three classes, only the K-2 consisted of children from a Mexican-American disadvantaged area. Approximately eighteen children attended each summer session. Almost all of them had spoken Spanish as their mother tongue before entering school. At the time of their participation in the class, the children had attained various levels of proficiency in English.

A similar program was carried on in the summer of 1969 in a Los Angeles public school classroom in San Fernando. There were thirty first and second grade children, twenty-eight of whom were Mexican-American. This article will describe the rationale underlying the programs followed in both the demonstration school and the public school classes, and illustrate

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SUSAN WASSERMAN, California English Teacher Specialist and Assistant Professor of Education in Language Arts and Teacher Training, has worked as elementary and pre-kindergarten teacher for ten years, taught in NDEA programs and served as consultant to numerous school systems. Dr. Wasserman conducted two sections at the 1970 CATE Convention in San Francisco.

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the procedures and activities used to raise proficiency in written and oral English.

The curriculum followed in all these classes incorporated the three strands outlined in the *English Language Framework for California Public Schools:* Language, Composition, and Literature. The particular emphasis was the use of literature as a springboard for composition and other language explorations. The resultant program was eclectic: selections and suggestions were utilized from "A Curriculum for English" (The University of Nebraska Curriculum Development Center); certain patterned language strategies were incorporated from English as a Second Language programs; and numerous activities wrought from the past classroom experiences of the demonstration teacher rounded out the program.

The same kind of program was followed in both the demonstration school and the public school class. A description of a typical day might serve as the best explanation. Each day the teacher presented a story she had selected from one of the nine genres: Folk, Fanciful, Animal, Adventure, Myth, Fable, Other Lands and People, Historical Fiction, and Biography. Rather than moving to different categories daily, selections for a week or more were chosen from the same category.

Typically four motifs appeared in the stories presented:

1. Journey from home to confrontation with a monster.
2. Journey from home to isolation.
3. The rescue from a harsh home and the miraculous creation of a new one.
4. The conflict between the wise beast and the foolish beast.

Prior to commencing the model story of the day, the teacher would alert the children to its motif by saying something like, "In today's story, boys and girls, an animal is going to leave his safe home and, oh, he's going to meet a monster," or "In today's story one animal is going to be very smart while another is going to be very silly."

The teacher developed with the children an awareness of the repetitive line also. This was done very simply by saying, "Boys and girls, in today's story see if you hear something over and over again." The children developed this awareness of repetition quickly. Evidence of this was the reaction of one first grader on the third day of class. As he heard the repetitive line, "Who's that crossing over my bridge?" from *The Three Billy Goats Gruff,* he poked his friend and knowingly whispered, "That's what we're going to hear a hundred times!"

On certain days several versions of the same story were presented. The children compared the versions; they discussed similarities as well as

differences. Questions such as the following were usually raised: Were the characters the same? Was there the same repetitive line or had it been altered? Did the monster act in the same way or were there differences? Was the ending the same? In *Little Red Riding Hood,* for example, the children found that in some versions the wolf ate Grandma and Little Red Riding Hood, while in others he ate only Grandma, while in yet another version both Grandma and Little Red Riding Hood escaped any injury.

At yet other times similar stories from other countries were presented. For example, the day that the *Gingerbread Boy* was told, *The Pancake* and *The Bun* were also read. The children soon began to understand that folk tales grow out of the particular environment and lives of the people who make them up and then continue to tell them for generations.

One child quickly grasped the reason why certain stories utilized a bun instead of a gingerbread cookie, etc. Ruben said, "My mommie and I couldn't write a story about a bun because I don't know what a bun is." This led to ideas about kinds of food that he or his mother could tell a story about because of their use of that food in their home. Some of his ideas were "The Runaway Refried Bean," "The Chili" and "The Tortilla."

The discussion following the teacher's reading or telling of the story was, then, in terms of the structure of the story: the motif, the repetitive line, the characterization, and the style. Upon conclusion of this kind of discussion, small groups of children dispersed to other parts of the room for other activities. These activities included illustrating the story of the day followed by dictation or writing of a retell of the story; listening and viewing a story of like motif or a different version of the model story at the Listening Post and Viewing Center; preparing puppets for a puppet show to be performed later in the activity period, etc.

One group of children, however, remained with the teacher. She helped these children recall the motif of the model story. Then she asked for ideas concerning other animals or children that might leave home; what else might the monster be? Gorillas, hippos, alligators, giraffes, squirrels and other animals were mentioned by the children. This kind of questioning usually resulted in many ideas being generated. Agreement upon the main characters was usually reached before the teacher asked for the opening line of the story. The teacher then acted as scribe, attempting at all times to record faithfully the children's own "personal language."

An example of a group-composed story produced during the summer of 1968 in the demonstration school after "The Gingerbread Boy" had

been read should illustrate both the ethnic make-up of the group and the ability of young children to innovate on the theme.

THE TORTILLA

A woman made a big tortilla. She put it in the oven. She put it by the window to cool. The tortilla ran away!

The woman chased Mr. Tortilla. The farmer chased the tortilla.

"Don't chase me! I'll sing you a song."

"I ran away from the little woman.
I ran away from the old man.
I can run away from you, I can."

The bear is in the forest. He saw the tortilla. "I can't hear, Tortilla. Please come closer. Come even closer. I still don't hear."

So the tortilla came closer. The bear said, "Come closer. I still can't hear. Come closer to my head."

The tortilla came closer.

The bear opened his mouth and ate the tortilla all up.

Written by David, AnaMarie, Eddie, Marta, Isela, Lillian, Raul

A year later, in the summer of 1969, after the same story was read to a group of first and second graders in the public school class, the story produced was quite different. This was extremely interesting, as the ethnic and socio-economic composition of the group remained the same. It might be assumed that the story reflected a degree of acculturation identifiable as exposure to T.V.—especially the commercials. They called it "The Pizza Man."

THE PIZZA MAN

Once upon a time there was a Pizza Man. A man delivered the pizza. The Rams wanted to eat it. They put it in the oven. Mother Ram opened the door from the oven.

The Pizza Man said,

"Run, run as fast as you can,
You can't catch me,
I'm the Flying Pizza Man."

The Pizza ran away from the home of the Rams.

The Pizza Man met a chicken, an alligator, a horse, a cow, a bear, a hawk, a leopard, and a skunk.

The leopard was having a party. He invited the Pizza Man. They all got the goodies ready.

Meanwhile, the Pizza Man was walking around the leopard. The leopard jumped on the Pizza Man and ate him all up.

And that's the end of the Pizza Man.

Written by Earnest, Jennie, Lupe, Ruben, Donald, Gilbert, Marie, Kenneth, Carmelo

Some teachers feel that much of literature is not relevant for today's children and question the advisability of utilizing it in the schools. Yet, on the day that Apollo 11 was launched, the model story planned by the teacher for this same public school class was not a science or science fiction story but rather "Chicken Little." After "Chicken Little" was read, a small group of children remaining with the teacher recalled the structure of the story. A simple question by the teacher concerning what else, other than an acorn, could fall from the sky brought forth the following tale:

Apollo 11 Is Falling

Once upon a time there was one girl and one boy walking to school. Stage I of Apollo 11 fell. Linda and Tom said, "Apollo 11 is falling. Let's go to tell the President."

Along the way they met their Mother. "Apollo 11 is falling. We are going to tell the President. Please come along with us."

Mother and Linda and Tom walked along to tell the President. They met their Father. "Apollo 11 is falling. We are going to tell the President. Please come along with us."

Father said, "Apollo 11 is not falling. I just saw it on T.V. It is near the moon!"

So, they didn't go to see the President.

Written by Richard, Imelda, Veronica, Arthur, Joaquin, Angel, Henry

This story illustrates how young children with the understanding of motifs and the essence of the repetitive line were able to write a modern day fanciful tale.

Each day, upon completion of the group story, the young authors usually left the teacher to illustrate their story. Later, the stories and their illustrations were usually made into booklets for them to take home or have on the browsing table.

After the group story was completed another group of children usually joined the teacher. The language explorations in which they involved themselves usually took the form of oral activities in phonology, morphology, or syntax. Particular emphasis was in the area of sentence expansions and transformations. A description of these kinds of language explorations may be found in the article by William Stryker in the CALIFORNIA ENGLISH JOURNAL, Winter, 1968. Stryker described in detail the techniques utilized with the children in the summer program. He also illustrated the ease with which the young Mexican-American child was able to manipulate the language and do sentence transformations.

Some of the things which became apparent during the three summers that the program was utilized were:

1. Mexican-American children need many experiences with oral language—this must precede as well as accompany later written experiences.
2. A warm permissive climate which combines a fairly structured program emphasizing language development coupled with flexibility and creativity appears to maximize learning.
3. Literature appears to provide a wealth of some of the finest language upon which children can build their own understandings of English and extend their own personal language.
4. Children do internalize the language they hear if they are provided with many opportunities for hearing and utilizing language.
5. Children readily recognize the structure of stories and can utilize this awareness in creating improvisations which further their creative expression in all their communication skills.

If the school is not successful in compensating for the initial disadvantage that many Mexican-American children have in their ability to use English, then society can expect these children to continue to enter their adult lives with compounded handicaps. Since it is during the early years that children appear best able to internalize language effectively, it is the elementary school teacher who can become a "significant other" in guiding the child toward success in school life. It is the elementary school teacher who must utilize her expertise and provide a rich program of oral and written language.

Through exposure to a program emphasizing oral language, the young Mexican-American can become proficient in English. A learning deficit will be turned into a learning advantage, because the Mexican-American child then will be proficient in both Spanish and English.